DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 419 475 HE 031 268

AUTHOR Dowdy, Kilgour
TITLE Noises in the Attic: The Legacy of Expectations in the Academy.
INSTITUTION Georgia State Univ., Atlanta. Center for the Study of Adult Literacy.
PUB DATE 1998-03-00
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Diego, CA, April 13-17, 1998).
AVAILABLE FROM Transcript of video available from: College of Education, Room 367, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA 30303; e-mail: alcjdd@langate.gsu.edu
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *College Students; Diversity (Faculty); Diversity (Student); *Group Discussion; Group Experience; Higher Education; *Minority Group Influences; *Nondiscriminatory Education; Personal Narratives; *Racial Bias; Racial Factors; Racial Identification; *Racial Relations; Self Concept
IDENTIFIERS Eurocentrism

ABSTRACT

As an outcome of the author's experiences at several American universities, and based on critical race theory as espoused by Bell (which uses narrative to bear witness to lived experiences of racism in American society), a project was undertaken to record conversations with four non-white students at a university in the southern United States. Three, unplanned, hour-long conversations were recorded to explore participants' feelings and experiences as non-whites at a predominantly white academic institution. An edited version of the videotaped narratives, entitled "Noises in the Attic: A Conversation with Ourselves," was subsequently shown at conferences and private presentations in an effort to raise the consciousness of graduate students, administrators, and professors of education. The video is divided thematically, with each section describing some aspect of the experience of being "alien" in the white academic institution. The following issues are highlighted: the ways in which the exclusive discourse of the classroom promotes feelings of isolation among non-white students; the Eurocentric nature of academic methodology; balancing cultural identity with the demands made by the institutional culture; and the role of non-whites in resisting the stereotypes perpetuated when "other" voices are silenced in the classroom. (MAB)

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Noises in the Attic: The Legacy of Expectations in the Academy

Joanne K. Dowdy

Kilgour Dowdy
Assistant Director
Center for the Study of Adult Literacy
College of Education
Georgia State University
University Plaza
Atlanta, Georgia 30303-3083

Tel: 404-651-0403
Fax: 404-651-1415
email: epejkdx@panther.gsu.edu

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Noises in the Attic: The Legacy of Expectations in the Academy

"What's race got to do with it?" This is the constant refrain in conversations that I have with Blacks, Whites and Latinos. Not to mention my Korean and Puerto Rican associates. In one way or another, we are all perplexed by the many disguises that race matters take on in our daily lives. White people are bemused at the way in which White privilege is disguised as the "norm" in education and all other aspects of society. Black people are busy protesting against the fact that merit in one arena does not assure acceptance in any other sphere in which a non-white citizen can be judged by Whites in this society.

I for one was so nervous about the prospect of writing this paper before I began plotting the outline that I actually had a nightmare. Just the mention of race and its impact on me as a Black, female, Caribbean immigrant in this country causes me a negative physical reaction. In the nightmare I am sitting at a table as if I am at a conference presentation, and a light skinned Black woman stands up to make a point during the proceedings. She is shouting at the top of her voice, "I am tired of hearing about Black women being pilloried in the workplace because of their race." She continues to scream her protest at the panel until one or two of us realize that she is experiencing an epileptic seizure. She begins gagging, I leave my seat to go to her, and before

any one of us can get to her and calm her down, she collapses to the floor. We are all devastated by this woman's passionate outburst and the consequences to her health. I woke from the nightmare feeling drained and discouraged. Several hours later I had a conversation with a buddy from graduate school about her first year as an assistant professor. Ironically, she has been dealing with a great deal of angst because she had heard that some quarters assumed she was hired because she was Black. In other words, unqualified and the recipient of a "gimme."

The horror of my friend's experience reminded me of the perspective of Patricia Williams, an attorney and writer. In her writing, (Williams, 1995), she warns Black women against setting their hopes too high for the kind of life they can expect in this society. Fortunately for her, she

> was raised to be acutely conscious of the likelihood that, no matter what degree of professional or professor I became, people would greet me and dismiss my black femaleness as unreliable, untrustworthy, hostile, angry, powerless, irrational and probably destitute (p. 87).

If I were prepared for life in American society as thoroughly as Williams, I would not be left gasping for breath each time another racist goal is scored against me and my kind. In fact, I would be able to look the issue straight in the eye and say to myself, "Well dear, how else would you know that

you were alive in America?"

Critical Race Theory and Students of Color

Critical race theory generally signifies an attempt to name and discuss the reality of racism in American society; expose the "colorblind" policies which serve to enhance the power of White citizens at the cost of non-Whites; promote the voices of people of color who critique the dominant social order, and revisit civil rights law to address their inability to eradicate negative sociopolitical relationships (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1997).

I am a very recent admirer of critical race theory (CRT). One of the things that is most attractive to me about the theory as espoused by Bell (1987) is the place of narrative in bearing witness to the lived experience in a racist society. My journey through three White academic institutions as a student, has allowed me to develop a philosophy about living like "a fly in the milk." This perspective on the experience allows me to talk about the way in which I perceive the agenda of the White academic environment for non-White students, and the costs to those students to survive in a hostile environment. These students need a sense of individual worth and mentoring from other survivors. They also need to ground their work in their community rather than the esoteric ideals of research methodology.

To further explore my experience of being a "fly in the milk," I began talking about my observations of White culture, as it is demonstrated in the academic environment, with my friends and colleagues. As a consequence of that exploration, a product evolved around the theme of alienation. The product is a video presentation we call "Noises in the Attic: A Conversation with Ourselves" (Diaspora, 1997).

The Rationale Behind "Noises"

The project to record the experiences of four non-White students at a university in the southern United States began after a conversation with my friend E.M. He had just come to the university and was experiencing resistance to his ideas about education as a vehicle to liberate people. In one of his classes the professor called him a "terrorist." He wrote to me:

> I've had to come here and make sense of this place by myself, and with the help of other radical students of color. I say radical because color don't mean [anything] as far as I'm concerned. I have gained tremendously from retreating into those dignified places. . . . we live with the fact that we are a walking contradiction, the colonized attending the colonizer's institution, that which Fanon warned was the gravest mistake a colonized people could ever make.

A woman in the group wrote to me saying:

> We experienced racism structurally which is even more intense than the 'outrageous acts' and stories that people are wanting to hear about, and in my case, I had caring mentors and colleagues who were not engaged in 'outrageous acts' yet were still implicated in the enactment of white privilege and structural racism.

Along with another graduate student, who often talked with me about these matters, we sometimes discussed the way in which students of color in the various programs served the growth of White students on issues of diversity. At one time we doubted we could create a space in which students of color could develop their agendas as researchers with particular perspectives in spite of the Eurocentric environment. One of the members of our support group reminded me two years after her graduation that, "the "racisms" experienced were different, and [as such] it took on several forms even within caring mentoring relationships."

One of the women in the group went on to explain to me:

> We as a group were situated in different ways within the structural racism of the academy and that while some of us were nurtured and "cared" for, that wasn't enough to counter the effects of a Eurocentric academia and the entrenchment of whiteness in the ivory tower.

In the midst of this feeling of isolation and disillusionment, a small group of us began to talk together and "check in" to see how we were doing with our race relations.

It was difficult at first to accept that these several incidents unmasked the culture of the academy, and that the events represented certain non-negotiable aspects of the institution. The underlying philosophical posture of the institution allowed Whites to feel that they owned the institution and that we "students of color" should be grateful to be in their classes. We had to come to terms with the fact that "us" meant White and privileged, "them" meant the "great unwashed masses" who must be observed, documented, and compared to "norms" that White people of means identify as "civilized." And we were one of the "them."

If we non-White students had to do what Fanon (1967) suggested, and remove ourselves from the "jungle" of our upbringing in order to survive at the institution, then who was going to steer us on the course? How could we develop our voices as scholars within the tradition of our history and resistance to the White power structure that framed the methods of research that we were learning? Were we ever going to receive the kind of attention and grooming necessary to make our questioning of the status quo in educational research

come to some productive end?

With these questions in mind, four of the graduate students who spoke with me about these issues over two years, decided to sit down in front of a camera and record a series of unplanned "conversations" that explored our feelings and experiences as non-Whites in a predominantly White academic institution. We were two Black women, one of Caribbean heritage; one Latina whose parents were originally from Ecuador; a Mexican man who grew up in Southern California; and a descendant of Indian immigrants who grew up in New Jersey. Over the course of three hour-long conversations, we were able to relive, reconstruct, discuss and analyze our experiences in the school.

We found that talking with each other helped us to make sense of the kind of chaos and self-doubt that we felt as a result of our interactions with some White professors and students at the university. When we reviewed the taped conversations, it became clear that we created a vocabulary to describe our feelings and questions in the security of our "dignified space," the place where we were safe and felt respected. The reasons for our clashes with the establishment, in the persona of professors, were much more easily understood from the vantage point of reflection.

We also decided that we wanted to make a product that

other graduate students could share and use as a means to generate their own conversations about the academy and the reality of non-White students within it. The idea of presenting our findings at workshops that encouraged audience participation became the motivating force behind the editing and presentation of the video at conferences and private showings. At each site where the completed "Noises" was shown, the presenter came back to the group with new insights about the way in which the perspectives of Blacks and Whites differed. More importantly, we began to understand that the community workshop approach to the video was necessary if the video was going to achieve the ideal of raising consciousness among graduate students, administrators and professors of education.

The Themes in the Video

Using the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), the four graduate students and one Assistant Professor looked at the tapes that we made over three sessions. We chose the themes that were representative of our conversations and found selective quotes that gave depth and clarity to the categories. Then we created titles for each of the sections. Beginning with a description of our feelings about being invisible members of the academic environment, like "noises in the attic," we worked through the issues of

"The White Man's Burden," "Filling in the . . ." and "Betwixt and Between." Each section described some aspect of the experience of being an "alien" in the White academic institution. We also used music from an Indian drum to link the pieces so that there was a representation of the "noises" that we made.

The "Noises"

My conversation with E.M. was concerned with being "non-White in the White academic environment." In one class E.M. was rendered "invisible" by the Eurocentric discourse, and he felt that

> if I open my mouth then it's an act of criminality. So if I sit there I'm invisible and if I open my mouth I'm a criminal. And so there's like those two aspects that we were talking about. . . we're invisible, but we're just like noises in the attic.

My experiences echoed the same feeling of pain at the hands of the non-inclusive discourse in the classroom. In one class I tried to explain that

> . . . when I open this book [on qualitative research] that talks about other, other, other, the colonizer's gaze, I'm talking about myself. It's a collection of people's thoughts about people like me. . . And so it's extremely uncomfortable to think that I'm studying a methodology that puts me at three removes.

The feeling of overhearing someone talk about you in another room dominates the way in which qualitative research theory is experienced. I continued on this theme with the reflection that

> reading the book is like watching millions of faces crowding in on this page trying to give their story. But there's no room for it. Because they've been "othered" right out of the picture.

In response to the notion of how it feels to first realize that the academic environment is set up to assure a feeling of isolation, S. laments

> I felt, and I felt it, you know, in my bones that I'm not even able to verbalize and because the experience has been one of, you know, surviving and struggling against memory, you know, struggling against forgetting, you know, having slowly, you know, because you adapt the language and now you begin to see as you said, yourself within the eye of [the] dominant culture. So you become; you forget you, you know, forget your language. You forget the ideas and the thoughts that were actually rooted in collectivity, right. . .And I think you know, what I would have been like without others, I would have been dead.

G. picks up the motif of isolation and continues with her recollection of the way she survived the graduate school experience.

> [There were people] who while I was going through all of the negotiation within the institution who reminded me all along of who I really am. . .But that's what all of this has been about, negotiating identity.

For D., the whole issue of identity is central to the kind of "smoke and mirrors" that the educational environment sets up for students of color. As far as he is concerned, it is some of the "self-images" that the institution perpetuates that students of color have to confront and overcome. He goes on to say that

> many times these methodological issues that [we're]

> talking about are sort of chalked up as pure methodological issues. And you know, as if to say that there's nothing in the process of forming a method which has to do with identity.

These comments suggest the level of frustration and anxiety that the students' feelings revealed. Their comments also indicate the level of stress experienced by students of color if they do not create opportunities among themselves to talk about their concerns. Their conversations begin to reveal the effects of using the ideology of the Eurocentric institutions during their training as researchers.

White Man's Scrapbook

In this section the feelings of alienation were further described. The sense of being outside of the main discourse was outlined by G. in her reflection that

> the family scrapbook, being the knowledge and information of the academy,. . . [makes you feel that] if you were a stepchild, or a foster child, then you'd be in the attic.

This is a very different reality to the one presented by J.'s understanding of the "family album." She elucidates her frustration in these terms:

> In my scrapbook I have white and non-white extensions, on the family tree. So it's not one, it's not monocultural. But the impression that you are made to accept in general when you're going through the school system, is that other people's albums are only one, they're monocultural. They don't have "Other" in there and so when they come to the table to discuss with you about what a family album's like, they only want to talk about it in terms of what their understanding of a family

> album is like. And so your discussion and your trying to integrate the fact that an album can have this whole range, you know, that everyone doesn't look the same; everyone doesn't talk the same; everyone doesn't come with the same background. . . but they still belong to the family. There's no space for that discussion. That's when you start feeling invisible.

In S.'s eyes the pain is further exacerbated when the researcher goes on to produce work within the methodology of the academic institution. S. says that "It's the experience of, [being]. . . university sanctioned, to now produce knowledge, but that knowledge has to be part of the white man's scrapbook,right." And because the methodology demands that you say things in a particular way it means that you adopt the perspective of the academics who produce books with a Eurocentric agenda.

E. continues to add details to this dilemma in his comment that

> We are kind of caught in between. . .if you just sit there obviously, . . . the Eurocentric discourse renders us invisible. If you say something then maybe you are a window to the exotic.

D. answers this comment with a reflection that work done outside the Eurocentric domain, or Eurocentric methodology done with an "ethnic" perspective is dismissed by the traditional academics. As he says: "It's a question that not so much that someone would attack you for doing it . . . it's just irrelevant."

Between and Betwixt

In this section I have edited the comments from several parts of the three separate conversations into a flowing script. The script, hopefully, represents our best thoughts on the theme of boundaries in the academic environment. In the discussion we have created a mirror of our feelings. We have "taught" ourselves through writing (Calkins, 1985) about our position as students of color in the halls of academia.

D: What I see us articulating is that ponderous position of us being here kind of in diaspora, that does not allow you the moral comfort of assuming one point of view, and kind of forces you to require this dialogic thing of everybody.

S: So I began thinking about my story, you know, and I guess it had to do with my shock at coming to the university because of the different meanings and the different feelings and emotions that were invested in education that was, you know, very different from how I viewed education. When I was involved in my undergraduate years I was involved in a community based organization, and we worked with Latinos and Mexicanos, Salvadoreanos and Guatematecos who were just applying to get their residency. And so we provided education classes and citizenship, but all, you know, focused our situation as Latinos, as people indigenous to California. And we focused on civil democratic participation, you know, and so education took on a different meaning. Education meant, you know, we,we were engaging in these classes so that we were able to participate in democracy and, you know, and to prepare in terms of protesting against agencies and institutions that impinged on our rights. And so it was education for social justice, that's what it was.

E: Within the institution we have to perform a political identity you know, and develop our political identity within the institution. . . I am very careful how I represent myself and what I say about myself. And what I say, it's. . . hard to describe other than that you have to be . . . you can't just be totally comfortable. For

some reason I still don't feel totally comfortable. . . something is telling us not [to feel comfortable].

J: I think that that would be terribly dangerous. That would be taking the whole living room design and furniture to be so much ours and to be comfortable in it, that we've forgotten that we came in there as visitors to that setting. And that the china and the silver are not our daily every day utensils. And to take on a whole persona that excludes all the other stuff that we brought with us. . . you're also kept balancing on one foot. Because it keeps asking you the question, are you in or are you out? Have you bought our thing or are you still questioning it? It keeps you on that line, thin line.

E: But I think there's people who've . . . been able to kind of white-wash themselves and get in there. And, but you know like for me I don't want to, I'm not like that, I, for some reason I have a consciousness, you know, and so my consciousness dictates otherwise. But, you know, like sometimes I wish, man I wish I wasn't so politicised.

G: Just be a good student

E: Yeh, my life would be so nice, you know. (Laughs).

J: But what both of you have said at different places, in different conversations, that you come in here as a community, whether you like it or not, you come as a community and those hundred million faces standing behind you are never going to let you just forget that they're here holding you up. And you are standing on their shoulders. You're not here on your own steam.

E: We are walking on the backs of everybody. I know I'm walking on the backs.

J: And to let go of that consciousness is to be the living dead.

Filling in the . . .

In this section, the final segment of the video

presentation, we look at the kind of roles that we perform as the "flies in the milk" of the White academic institution. Our awareness of the importance of voice and the resistance to stereotypes that are perpetuated by the silencing of the "other" in the classroom, ring out in our recollections of transforming moments. G. remembers the White male student who used the opportunity to rebel against the women of color who were leading the class. Race, gender, and class are all highlighted in the encounter.

G: I like to share this experience because again I'm writing letters and I think about how real these experiences are and how they've been acted out in so many different ways over the past four years. And in teaching a course I had, Enrique was in this course, I team taught it with Sofia and one night a student just lost it. And he was very upset. This is a young White man who was reacting to being accosted by two Black men, and I felt that in reality he was reacting to the class. The night that he came to class was three or four days after his experience. But he came to the class and he used that particular instance to denounce the class. And I left, I was very upset because I was like, well what have we been doing all semester, you know, the course was teaching foundations and we brought it from a cultural studies lens you know, using the voices of people of color to discuss education. And I realized that he wasn't so upset about being threatened that weekend, as he was about being threatened with the information. Okay, he really didn't know what to do with the information okay. And then this incident happened which makes him feel even more vulnerable. But it was so ironic to me like he felt like the academy was the place where he could come in and lose it like that. I kept thinking I've been that angry before in class and never been able to feel so comfortable in a classroom where I could explode like that. And to just take over the classroom.

The other issues raised here concern the White man's sense that the classroom belonged to him. He did not like the fact that the "borders" were changing without his consent. The presence of women of color in leadership roles further compounded his trauma.

The issues of identity and the way in which we "perform" our roles as the "token" comes across very strongly in this discussion. E. points out that

> On one hand, I don't want to be too essentialistic, like all this is, I speak for all Chicanos and whatever. But you know I know Spivak has a term that she's called "strategic essentialism." So sometimes we have to essentialize because we are the one for every one million that's not here, and so we have to, you know, it's not us,but we represent millions of people.

In response, G. brings up the issues that her dissertation raise as far as representation of experience.

> I'm writing letters to help me get through my dissertation and I'd write this letter to a friend and I'd say, I'm forced to speak about the experience of African American women, but I can't discuss my mom's experiences. I can't discuss my grandmother's experiences. Then, I say do you think my presence signifies to them that something's missing? I guess to be sarcastic, if you will, but I don't think that they recognize that in your essentializing that there are those million voices [who] are missing.

E: I think we're surrounded by arrogance

G: Yeh.

E: And so the discourse is arrogant. And so what do you do,

when you're like trying to, when you're in the same room with someone who's arrogant? So all you can do is kind of tap into your repertoire of identities, you know. I like the idea of identity not being a singular thing, a fixed thing, but it being a processual. It's a process. And that we have a repertoire of identities not just one, and so depending on what room of the house we are [in], we enact and depending on what time of the day it is. . . So we're forced to negotiate our identities within the spaces and so in a lot of ways because of the arrogance, we perform our identities. . . So on one level, it may be an emotional armor, you know. But, the fact is that you have to essentialize strategically,

G: . . . a lot of times I feel that they are looking at me and they don't recognize. . .They just see me. And I feel in some way if they could see that group behind me, then, perhaps, it would be a lot more powerful. But if it's just me,

J: Or it may be overpowering. I mean I have the opinion that to see those millions in our faces would be such an overpowering experience that the person would shut down completely. And so the whole arrogance is a performance to stave off those million faces. To keep away from the recollection of why there are noises in the attic.

E: It's traumatic. It's true.

J: It's a buffer, see, and when we start penetrating that buffer that's when you're in danger zone, and it becomes a criminal act, you see. Because you're breaking and entering.

E: We're transgressing, you know, to use bell hooks' words.

Ultimately, we see ourselves as "bridges" to "help others . . . to navigate," as S. says. We also have a specific job to perform in the predominantly white and Eurocentric academic environment. As S. says:

> [We must] create new avenues for other people and for the community. But not to assimilate, not to be comfortable. Sometimes I don't understand how is it that some people can be so comfortable.

But when we perform our identities in the academy we need to assist the White people who want to understand and those who are "struggling with the fact that they don't want to 'other,' . . ., my friend, or my fellow colleague, or my student." We must ensure that people, the non-white people among our friends, students, or colleagues, feel that they are included in the "norm" of humanity.

In response to the question, the true point of the video presentation, "How do we talk to whiteness?" J. responds candidly:

> My gut reaction is . . . we need to name the assumptions, so that we can move the discussion in a creative, constructive direction.

And S. responds quickly, "Yeh, whiteness is the assumption."

Implications

In a panel discussion on the issues discussed in "Noises" I was asked if I thought it was important, or necessary, to explain to White people what the experience of being the "other" was like. I answered that it was more important for me to realize where the questions were coming from i.e. how come I see the world differently than most White people in th academy. More importantly, it was essential that I understood

what position I was in as an assistant professor of education who was responsible for educating White teachers.

I remember explaining that it had recently occurred to me that many of the teachers I had to work with were coming from a very different perspective than I was. I felt that the children of color in the public schools were so many rough diamonds waiting to be polished in the hands of caring teachers. The White teachers, for the most part, seemed to think that they were civilizing barbarians, bringing them into the fold of civilization. Knowing the difference in the perspectives is what matters to me because it keeps me out of trouble when I work to enlighten the teachers who take their White priviledges for granted and work to bring all of the children they encounter into that way of seeing the world they inhabit.

So it is with the graduate students in the White academy. They must continually work to understand how their world view differs from that of the people in power at the institutions where they study. The graduate students must continually "check in" with each other, those from the "hood," to find out if they are critiquing the epistemology of the White academic establishment. Without this recursive process, from self to the knowledge espoused by the academy and back to the community, we will continue to be misled about our role in the

academy. Without each other, we will forever be distracted by the symptoms of racism as it exhibits itself in the arrogance of the discourse that makes up the content of Eurocentric education.

"Noises" was one way to deal with the "static" that threatened to take over a productive engagement with traditional education. It provided a safe space where the graduate students could hold hands and encourage each other to think through the pain of rejection and self-doubt. It provides a model for reflection to other graduate students and the many players who constitute the academy. It is an opening in an otherwise close space. More than that, it is an invitation to others to join a meaningful dialogue.

Conclusion

Critical race theory offers a lens through which to understand the story of these four graduate students and one assistant professor in the academic environment. It allows us the opportunity to step back from the difficult issue of racism and the way that it impacts on our lives. The CRT lens also allows us the important tool to name our experiences and have them validated in the company of other like-minded people. This is a necessary and singular moment. Without the validation of our experiences, students of color would otherwise be abandoned to feelings of alienation and

discouragement in the face of the institutional racism that they must negotiate every day of their lives.

I cannot help but reiterate the urgent call of Asa Hilliard (1995):

Without a sense of "we", collective action is nearly impossible. Without a sense of we, collective action that may be possible will be limited and superficial. We can fight oppression together if we exist. But beyond fighting oppression, we can draw upon a common culture to fashion a new world, if we do indeed belong to that common culture. There really is no escape. Either we belong to a people or we belong to no one. Many of us try to belong to new groups or to the mythical "mainstream." Such attempts are accompanied by a profound sacrifice --- the sacrifice of thousands of years of cultural heritage. The aesthetic loss is bad enough. Yet there is also a painful psychological, political, and economic cost as well. The lack of group unity is a guarantee of group vulnerability. (p. 131)

Notice to Readers

"Noises in the Attic: A Conversation with Ourselves" is available as a transcript. Groups who want to organize workshops around the themes discussed in the presentation can speak with one of the Working Group members to organize a

visit at the site of the proceedings. Copies of the tape are not available to the general public at this time. We would be happy to talk with intersted individuals about the possibility of presenting the tape as part of a panel discussion or as part of other forms of community activities.

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